

[Review] Charlotte Walk-Said and John D Kelly, ed. (2015) Corporate social responsibility? Human rights in the new global economy

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Book Review for JRAI

'Corporate Social Responsibility – Human rights in the New Global Economy' Edited by Charlotte Walker-Said & John D. Kelly

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The ethical positioning of economic growth in relation to human and social outcomes is fluid. The momentum of CSR emerges during greater regulation of, and public debate about, business practices. Corporates are not the only ones shaping the ethical environment. This publication examines CSR, and its variants, in determining and regulating those changes.

Walker-Said's introduction is a well-written summary of a good book, explaining most chapters in terms of key Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) challenges and debates; the positive and negative contributions of corporates to the realization of human rights agendas. The book is in three parts. The first part considers the development of a CSR discourse through practices of communication and coercion by corporations, NGOs, activists and academia. The second part address the legal platform of CSR, considering existing legislation, the scope of liabilities and enforcement. The final part incorporates earlier material to examine the African context of international markets and emerging political systems, including when private corporations are seen as more responsible than governmental institutions. Extractive industries represent that larger proportion of evidence within the book.

Benson's chapter on the tobacco industry reminds us that there are financial bottom lines to business function. In a theme repeated elsewhere, he observes that what corporates say and what they do can be quite different matters The language of

CSR, also comes under scrutiny. Hirsch (in a chapter repeated in Dolan & Rajak's recent 'Anthropology of Corporate Social Responsibility'), highlights a terminology of 'strategically deployable shifters'. Phrases like 'sustainability' and 'CSR' are mobilised to grow a jungle of virtuosity that surrounds corporate prioritisation of economic interests. As critics struggle to cut a path through to the economic operation, the Higher Education institute, with its own financial priorities and social-environmental 'virtues', colludes via virtuous partnerships with corporates, thus providing intellectual validity and making the virtuous jungle ever denser.

Bush delivers an historical examination of the lesser known, and less successful, prosecutions of business entities in the Nuremberg Trials. With an eye on contemporary events, Bush highlights the negative economic consequences of prosecuting big companies. Criminal accountability for past actions is 'only one of many interests to be served'. Scheffler points to international criminal courts holding corporates to account along similar lines to war tribunals. Gilmore compares systems of military and corporate compliance, noting the lack of effective sanctions in the latter and reasoning that military systems of command could also safeguard corporates from incurring liabilities.

The inter-disciplinary collection contains an interesting array of different outlooks, which includes some qualified support for CSR. For example, although Rosenblum argues that the unexpected permeation of CSR into commerce has ignited positive changes to production conditions, he warns us to engage with CSR, but not trust it. Chapters by Kaeb, Wynhoven and Aftab, influenced by Amartya Sen, look towards non-legal mechanisms of compliance. In my mind, these latter readings are

reminiscent of older debates in economic anthropology (although in ways less predictable at that time). These authors suggest that the 'institution' of corporates not only maximise profits but maximise other values too. Core company values, like other ontologies, are imagined as consistent across a range of practices. Or at least that is the idea. The evidence from other chapters suggests that any corporate ontology might contain significant conflicts or contradictions and the difficulties of legal accountability cannot be understated.

Although the language of CSR is examined and the book reveals a variety of corporate practices, the actual corporation is too easily reduced to a monolithic, unitary actor (with similarly conceived shareholders). I am never quite sure what makes a corporate a corporate. They cannot be identical, internally homogenous entities - there must be a spectrum of differentiation incorporating variations of structure, capacity, and ethos. The corporate is too conveniently bounded. Evans' chapter on multi-stakeholders only covers a small aspect of this question. For example, since speaking to private security companies that offer international corporates security analysis and protection services, I am mindful that the security sector can shape corporate operations. What happens to CSR when corporates outsource expertise and knowledge to other companies?

The questions that delved into 'the State', and occupied much attention in the social sciences, have yet to be similarly applied to 'the Corporate' - a social process often reported as a *fait accompli*. In order to build upon the insights of scholarly work on CSR and the movement towards corporate governance, 'the Corporate' needs

further deconstruction to understand more about the shaping of future human (and economic) rights.

Jonathan Newman
University of Sussex

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